

REFERENCES

- Gibson-Hill, C. A. (1948): The Storm-Petrels occurring in the northern Indian Ocean and adjacent seas. *JBNHS* 47 (3): 443-8.
- (1953): Notes on the sea birds of the orders Procellariiformes and Pelecaniformes recorded as strays or visitors to the Ceylon coast. *Spolia Zeylanica* 27 (1): 83-102.
- Gordon, M. S. (1955): Summer ecology of oceanic birds off southern New England. *Auk* 72 (2): 138-47.
- Murphy, R. C., (1936): Oceanic Birds of South America, New York.
- Phillips, W. W. A. (1950): Wilson's Storm-Petrels, shearwaters and other seabirds in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. *JBNHS* 49 (3): 503-8.
- Phillips, W. W. A. (1955): Wilson's Petrel [*Oceanites oceanicus* (Kuhl)] in Indo-Ceylon waters, with special reference to the 1954 southward migration. *ibid.* 53 (1): 132-3.
- Roberts, B. (1940): The life cycle of Wilson's Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* (Kuhl). *Brit. Graham Land Exped.* 1934-37 *Sci. Repts.* 1 (2): 141-94.
- Schott, G. (1935): *Geographie des Indischen und Stillen Ozeans*, Hamburg.
- Serventy, D. L. (1952): Movements of the Wilson Storm-Petrel in Australian Seas. *Emu* 52 (2): 105-16.
- Sewell, R. B. S. (1955): A study of the sea coast of Southern Arabia. *Proc. Linn. Soc. Lond.* [1952-53] 165 (2): 188-210.

11. PHOTOGRAPHING A COLONY OF EGRETS (*BUBULCUS IBIS* AND *EGRETTA GARZETTA*) IN ASSAM

(With a plate)

The ubiquitous egret must often be viewed by many people as a mere 'accessory' to grazing cattle or to the country's limitless paddy fields. Few of us can have had the opportunity (? or, the inclination) of observing these birds at close quarters. In fact, I myself would have missed such an opportunity had not a sizeable colony of both species of egret, decided to breed this year within half a mile of my bungalow. I felt 'duty bound' both to the Society, and my camera, to attempt to photograph what I was later to discover, were beautiful and fascinating subjects.

In his breeding plumage the Cattle Egret, when seen close to, is transformed into a bird of real beauty—the black legs, the pure white of the wings, the magnificent russet-brown of the neck and breast, and the yellow beak and eye yield a study that is really worthy of colour film. However, in these days of curtailed imports one has little choice with photographic material but this does have the salutary effect (or should have!) of stopping the 'one for luck' attitude of which so many photographers appear to be guilty—the writer included.

The accompanying illustrations were taken with a Leica camera, fitted with a 200 mm. telephoto lens, using Kodak Tri-X film exposed at 1/500th sec. at an aperture of f5.6 to f8. The camera was steadied by one of the supports of the machan, as the use of a tripod was prohibited by the great number of nests, at all angles, which surrounded the hide at ranges from ten feet upwards.

Although one tends to associate the egret with open country the nesting site for this particular colony was immediately adjacent to the local cinema—a more inappropriate and unsalubrious place for the rearing of young would be difficult to find even within a radius of twenty miles. I was unable to establish whether the birds have regularly used this site (as I believe both species tend to do), but this habit would seem to offer the only logical explanation for their strange choice.

The nests themselves were situated in clumps of bamboo which extended over an area of some one and a half acres. The population must have been about five hundred pairs with the Cattle Egret representing at least eighty per cent. Perhaps, conscious of their superior grace and elegance, the Little Egrets kept aloof from their counterparts, but they did not form a separate colony. Their nests, however, were identical as was the incubation period—some fifteen to twenty days with the eggs laid, in this instance, at the beginning of June. The incubating appeared to be the prerogative of the female in both cases¹ although the male of the Little Egret assisted in the building of the nest. Unfortunately, I was unable to observe whether both partners shared in feeding the young.

The Little Egret may lack a diversity of colour in its breeding plumage but exquisite 'aigrettes' render it a singularly worthwhile subject although difficult, as the plumes are shown to their best advantage only when the bird is alighting or in the act of flying. That the export of the 'aigrette' feathers is now banned is, to my mind, a sensible step in the right direction; for not only do these birds considerably assist the farmer, but also they adorn the paddy fields (which often require a relief from monotony) to an infinitely greater degree than their feathers do a woman's hat—which they usually don't!

It is so easy to take nature for granted that it isn't until one has a chance for a closer look that the beauty, variety, and charm of the commonplace are revealed. After photographing these egrets I have derived considerable enjoyment from observing other 'common' birds which, hitherto, I had considered to be merely a part of the countryside and, therefore, hardly worthy of a second glance. I hope, sincerely, that some readers may have a similar opportunity.

SYCOTTA T.E.,
KHARIKATIA P.O.,
ASSAM,
September 9, 1958.

J. H. BURNETT

¹ Actually, both sexes take part in incubation and feeding the young.—Eds.